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Soviet 'peace' panel jeered in Minnesota

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MINNEAPOLIS — Soviet delegates to a privately sponsored "Minneapolis Peace and Disarmament Conference" were introduced to the real world of American hard-ball politics yesterday when they were jeered, heckled and mercilessly interrogated at a public forum at the University of Minnesota at St. Paul.

Worst of all, from the Soviet point of view, nearly all the questions were about Soviet mistreatment of Jews and other religious minorities, dissidents and Soviet citizens who tried to leave Russia — just the sort of human rights questions the Soviets insist they won't talk about.

The Soviets were furious at the day's events. Their American colleagues were, with one stated exception, mortified.

"I am sure some of the people we saw there today were Nazis," said Vitaly I. Kobysh, an officer in the Department of Information of the Soviet Communist Party.

Mikhail Milshtein, a senior fellow of a Soviet research institute, blamed Harrison Salisbury, the journalist who moderated the session.

"I was surprised by the way he managed the forum and gave the floor to certain elements," Milshtein said. "Certain rules of behavior were not followed.

"Can you imagine if some of you came to the Soviet Union? Would the audience say that every one of you were members of the CIA?" This was his first experience in such a forum where anyone was allowed to speak. "We can assure you that nothing like this ever happens in the U.S.S.R."

Another Soviet delegate brushed aside a private apology by one of the American delegates. "It was nothing. They were Jews, after all." Other American delegates grumbled that "better control" was not exercised over who got to ask questions.

"Since they don't have a free press," said one American, "they honestly didn't know what some of the demonstrators were talking about."

"I am deeply ashamed," said the Rev. Paul Moore, Episcopal Bishop of Washington, to the ringing applause of the Americans at a discussion later. "I am deeply humiliated."

He said he consoled himself "with the knowledge that this same thing has happened to many of us as well. Unfortunately, this is part of what can happen in a public forum."

Erwin Salk, a businessman and American delegate to the conference, which is sponsored by the Institute for Policy Studies, a liberal Washington think tank, and the Soviet Institute of the U.S.A. and Canada, was equally mortified.

"I thought about sending notes to the Soviets," Salk said, "telling them of Andrew Young's description of the thousands of political prisoners in American prisons, of the blacks, Hispanics, and native Americans who are on our death rows. I thought about telling them of the sterilized Puerto Rican women."

Americans were wrong to try to "lay down the ground rules" in discussions of human rights, Salk said, because the Soviets "could talk about Guatemala, Chile, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and even Peru when we bring up Poland and Afghanistan. We are here trying to talk about making a contract to stay alive. Then, after that, we can get on with selling things back and forth to each other."

Only Don Fraser, the mayor of Minneapolis, defended those who asked what one American delegate called "impertinent questions" at the morning forum — held at the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs on the university campus.

"I can attest to the fact that those who showed up there do have honest convictions," he said. "In political life we must recognize not only numbers, but the intensity of feeling." He was sorry that the Soviet guests had been made to feel bad, the mayor said, but he was pleased they got "a glimpse into one aspect of community sentiment."

Fraser's defense of the interrogators, some of whom identified themselves as Jewish, was greeted with silence.

Kobysh, the Soviet delegate, told the American delegates the incident was, in fact, useful in just the way the mayor described it. "We have suddenly found ourselves with concrete reality," he said. He was pleased that the St. Paul forum was filmed, he said, because it would be shown to Soviet audiences as "the reason why America is not yet ready to say it will not make a nuclear first strike."

"Democracy is good, as we know. But democracy has its limits. Hitler, after all, stayed in power. How did he do this? He stayed in power through elections.

"We know that several hundred Nazis are here in the United States, and they are not punished." Kobysh said that since he is Ukrainian, perhaps some of the Nazis in America were among those who killed his fellow Ukrainians during World War II, and perhaps some of these Nazis "were among the demonstrators today."